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**Michael H. Kater, "Carl Orff im Dritten Reich," Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 43, 1 (January 1995): 1-35.**

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**Michael H. Kater, "Carl Orff im Dritten Reich," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 43, 1 (January 1995): 1-35.**

**Reviewed by David B. Dennis**

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The description of composer Carl Orff's life in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* includes the following passage: "From 1930 to 1933 Orff was conductor of the Munich Bach Society.... He had already, in 1925, made adaptations for the stage of three works by Monteverdi, and all this work eventually culminated in the composition of *Carmina Burana*, produced in Frankfurt in 1937. During the war Orff remained in Germany, but only after 1945 could he develop his work fully." This entry belies the fact that Orff produced major works between 1939 and 1945, including *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (1939), *Der Mond* (1939), *Catulli Carmina* (1943), and *Die Kluge* (1943). It also contradicts the composer's own words: immediately after the premiere of *Carmina Burana*, Orff said to his publisher, "Everything I have written to date, and which you have, unfortunately, printed, can be destroyed. With *Carmina Burana*, my collected works begin." A comparable gap between 1933 and 1945 exists in the biographies of many German composers, musicians, music critics, and music scholars. Only recently has progress been made toward remedying this. Over the last decade, a handful of musicologists, music historians, and historians of the non-musical sort have started to address the impact National Socialist "Musikpolitik" had on German music life.

However, as Michael Kater points out, any attempt to fill this gap with clear-cut, "Schwarz-Weiss Tunen" is inadequate. The notion that haunted Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* -- of a "gray zone" between resistance and compromise -- seems also to have been the domain inhabited by many musicians who remained in Germany through the Nazi era. The case of Wilhelm Furtwängler is best-known. As Kater's criticism of recent work on the conductor implies, despite attempts to remove the blackest spots from his reputation, Furtwängler's compromises mired him inextricably in Levi's gray zone.

In the present article, Kater -- who has already given us important work on jazz in the Third Reich -- fills some more of this void. But in the case of Orff too, the historian confronts ambiguity. After the war, categories established by occupation authorities for German artists included "black" for collaborators (Furtwängler was so ranked), "white" for victims and resisters, and "gray" for those in between. Although subsequently cleared, Orff was initially categorized as "gray-unacceptable." Nonetheless, biographies of the composer have ranged between interpretive extremes, depicting him either as an enthusiastic Nazi or as an active resistor. After reviewing these black and white variations, Kater convincingly argues that given newly accessible documents at the Orff Center in Munich and testimony from Orff's contemporaries elicited for this article, we must recast this musician's portrait in more appropriate shades of gray.

Carl Orff is best known as the composer of *Carmina Burana*. What most of today's listeners don't remember is that *Carmina Burana* was composed during the Hitler era and received a complicated response from Nazi cultural authorities. Music Orff wrote during the Weimar period established him as a modernist, but not an atonalist. Nevertheless, in 1933 the watchdogs in Rosenberg's *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* criticized Orff for lack of respect toward old masters. Upon its first performance, then, some officials deemed *Carmina Burana* undesirable: one described it as "bayerische Niggermusik," others considered its sometimes randy subject matter pornographic. However, despite opposition from some Nazis -- mainly members of the Rosenberg circle -- *Carmina Burana* was an artistic and public success. Indeed, largely on account of its popularity Orff enjoyed benefits from the regime, including support from the *Reichsmusikkammer*, a stipend from the propaganda ministry, radio play of his music, immunity from wartime service, and a commission for a new opera from Baldur von Schirach, Gauleiter of Vienna.

According to Kater, Orff did not alter his compositional style in response to Nazi dictates; nor did he write

music for evidently Nazi texts. So why did he and his works thrive in the Third Reich? Kater suggests that his music did contain elements that met Nazi aesthetic requirements: diatonic tonality; a primitive, *Volkslied* character; monorhythmic sequences; and a fairy-tale or escapist quality. But perhaps more importantly, in Kater's words, "Orff regularly took the counterinitiative; he tried, as far as he could, to get along" (14). Two endeavors exemplify Orff's adaptive techniques. First, by enlisting the aid of committed Nazis to promote his *Schulwerk*, he endeavored to make this pedagogical program part of HJ, BDM, SA, and SS culture. Orff's system was too complex for Nazi use, and therefore ignored; it was not, however, banned, as he claimed after the war. More reprehensible, though, was his composition of music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to replace that by Mendelssohn. Orff later defended this work as an innocent application of his unique modes of composition to a worthy text. But according to Kater, he was perfectly aware that this commission had the goal of "den nicht arischen Mendelssohn aus dem Geschäftsleben ausscheiden zu lassen," as his publisher put it in a letter to Orff.

On the basis of remaining in Germany, rising to prominence, and composing music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Orff had reason to fear blacklisting after the war. To clear himself, he had to prove that he had actively resisted the regime. As Kater exclaims, "the following is nothing less than sensational." In brief, Orff claimed to American authorities that he had helped Munich musicologist Kurt Huber form a resistance group; that Huber and other members (Sophie and Hans Scholl!) were arrested and ultimately executed; and that he had hidden in the mountains until the coast was clear. Occupation authorities accepted this story and cleared him. According to interviews Kater conducted with both Huber's wife and Orff's own wife at the time, however, none of this was true: Orff knew Kurt Huber, but their friendship was based on common music interests, not politics; Orff was not a member of the White Rose.

One must closely read Kater's careful description of these developments before passing judgment. But in the end, Kater seems justified in basing his opinion of the composer on this episode. To paraphrase: Orff's claim of involvement with the White Rose serves as a key to his character as well as his means of surviving in the Third Reich. Neither conformity nor resistance applies to this case. Never a National Socialist, Orff did whatever was required to work in peace, to keep away from politics, and to get through a dirty system as cleanly as possible (27). After reading Kater's article, it is hard to disagree with this assessment, or to avoid thinking it apt for many of those "gray, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise" whom Primo Levi identified both inside and outside the Lager.

Amending the biographies of such gray men, musical and otherwise, is a worthwhile undertaking. Kater has done a fine job of it here. But I believe that more than this needs to be done in order to determine the role that music itself had in National Socialist pageantry. This article opens with a list of problems that require our attention -- first and perhaps toughest among them: "What function did music have in a dictatorship which aimed at dominating the masses and then [going to] war?" (1) By working to answer this, we may come to better understand how the Nazis hid their gray world behind the brilliant colors of Germany's cultural legacy. Michael Kater continues to make strong contributions to this process; many more should be encouraged.

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